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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001454

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NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM KPAO TS

SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY EMBARKS ON ANOTHER HUNGER STRIKE

REF: A. TUNIS 1404

¶B. TUNIS 986

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) On November 1, Poloffs spoke with journalist Slim Boukhdhir who announced that he and attorney Mohamed Nouri had begun an open-ended hunger strike to protest GOT travel restrictions. Among their examples: a judge recently upheld a decision that bars Nouri from traveling, Boukhdhir has been waiting for a passport for five years, and police prevented attorney Mohamed Abbou from traveling twice during the last three months. This is the second hunger strike undertaken by opposition activists during the last six weeks (Ref A). End Summary.

¶2. (C) Journalist Slim Boukhdhir told Poloffs on November 1 that he and attorney Mohamed Nouri (former Secretary General of the International Association for Political Prisoners and current Secretary General of the breakaway group, Justice and Fairness Society) had begun an open-ended hunger strike to advocate for their right to travel internationally, long denied by the GOT. Five years ago when Nouri was Secretary General of the AISPP, the NGO published an article claimed that a political prisoner died while being tortured by government officials. The government refuted this allegation and initiated an investigation for defamation. The investigating magistrate has the ability to pass a case onto the court for prosecution, or dismiss the case before it goes to trial. According to Nouri, the investigation has been dragging on for four years and the investigating magistrate shows no indication that he is close to making a decision. On the basis of the investigation, the court four years ago imposed a travel ban on Nouri, which a judge last upheld on October 27. Boukhdhir and Nouri believe the ban is politically motivated, and undertook the hunger strike as a means of last resort.

¶3. (C) Boukhdhir, a journalist who often publishes articles highly critical of the government, has been waiting for the government to issue him a passport for four years. He also raised the case of attorney Mohamed Abbou, who spent over two years in prison after he was convicted of "defaming the judicial system." Abbou was pardoned and released early in July (Ref B), but since then police have twice prevented him from traveling outside the country. Abbou says there is no legal basis for such a ban, but is not optimistic that he will be allowed to travel in the near future. Al-Jazeera has already reported on the strike. This is the second time in six weeks that opposition activists have undertaken a hunger

strike (Ref A).

Government Response

¶4. (SBU) According to a government press release, Nouri is under investigation for defamation, based on articles 32 and 306 of the criminal code. The release acknowledges Nouri's October 23 request that the travel ban be lifted, but says that on October 27 the investigating magistrate refused his request and that Nouri did not appear in court to oppose the decision. As for Slim Boukhdhir, the press release claims he has never applied for a passport.

Civil Society Support

¶5. (C) The hunger strikers have already been visited or contacted by several prominent members of civil society. Opposition Progressive Democratic Party Secretary General Maya Jribi, attorney Ayachi Hammami, and Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate President Lotfi Hadji all attended the press conference announcing the hunger strike. Mokhtar Trifi, President of the Tunisian Human Rights League, visited the hunger strikers on November 1. Moncef Marzouki (President of the unregistered opposition Congress for the Republic party) and Sihem Ben Sedrine (spokesperson for the unregistered human rights NGO the National Council for Liberty and Labor) called them to express support. Attorney Abderraouf Ayadi (who represents former Guantanamo detainee Lotfi Lagha and is Vice-President of the Congress for the Republic) attempted to attend the press conference, but was prevented from doing so by plainclothes policemen who reportedly called him an "American spy" and a thief.

Comment

¶6. (C) Nouri and Boukhdhir probably timed the strike to pressure the government in advance of the November 7 20th anniversary of President Ben Ali's assumption of the presidency. They were likely also encouraged by the resolution of the recent opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) hunger strike, but that does not necessarily mean the new hunger strike will enjoy the same opportune resolution. Although both Nouri and Boukhdhir are longtime activists, it remains to be seen whether their hunger strike will prompt the same level of sympathy and support that surrounded the PDP hunger strike. PolOff will visit them and we will continue to monitor the situation closely. End

Comment.

GODEC